

"Sinners" in the Hands of An Angry God, Saints in the Hands of Their Father

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Abstract:

Jonathan Edwards sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is unquestionably his most famous and most analyzed work. It is a commonplace that "Sinners" exemplifies what is called fire and brimstone preaching designed to terrify auditors with its vivid depictions of hell's torments. Edwards sermons although superficially and structurally quite like those his fellow ministers were preaching and had been preaching for decades were unique in their rhetorical dynamics. These sermons were meant neither to instruct nor to persuade for their audiences were already instructed and persuaded. They were meant primarily to remind congregations of what they already knew and believed to give congregations opportunities to review and possibly experience anew his repetitive Calvinist theme of election and predestination.

Article:

Jonathan Edwards sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is unquestionably his most famous and most analyzed work. It has received a remarkable amount of attention; still, when it has been considered as a piece of persuasive discourse, it has generated more questions than answers.¹ It is a commonplace that "Sinners" exemplifies what is called fire and brimstone preaching designed to terrify auditors with its vivid depictions of hell's torments. But, given Edwards lifelong commitment to Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination, what purpose could he have intended such terrifying imagery to serve? If "Sinners" are always already damned, what good can be gained by preaching to them? How is the angry, vengeful God depicted in "Sinners" to be reconciled with the loving, forgiving deity Edwards describes elsewhere? Why were the audience responses to "Sinners" and other allegedly frightful sermons so diverse, ranging from joyous rapture to suicidal despair?

These are difficult questions with complex answers. Clearly, Edwards own views about what a sermon could and should properly do changed as his ministerial career progressed. However, it is possible to isolate four major factors determining his intentions at the time he wrote "Sinners". First is his own conversion experience, one which, despite its atypicality, stood as his paradigm throughout his career. Second is his witnessing personally others conversions, especially those occurring during Northampton's revival of 1734-35. Third is his consistent adherence to, if peculiar interpretation of, the orthodox doctrine of original sin and the structure it imposed upon the dynamics of conversion. Fourth, and finally, is his influence by, and ultimate departure from, the sensationalism of John Locke.

These factors combined to induce Edwards to create sermons although superficially and structurally quite like those his fellow ministers were preaching and had been preaching for decades that were unique in their rhetorical dynamics. These sermons were meant neither to instruct nor to persuade for their audiences were already instructed and persuaded. They were meant primarily to remind congregations of what they already knew and believed to give congregations opportunities to review and possibly experience anew his repetitive Calvinist theme of election and predestination.

Some of Edwards auditors knew, believed, and felt the rightness and justice of the Calvinist theme of election and predestination. Others knew, believed, and felt oppressed by it. Edwards recognized this division and exploited it fully. He knew he was inducing self-loathing in many of his listeners. He wanted to. He believed it his duty to do so because self-condemnation and self-loathing, though not in themselves the keys to the Kingdom, were, he believed, quite often the initial effects of having received those keys.

Of his actual initial conversion, Edwards reports only that before it occurred he had "been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty," while afterward it no longer seemed "like a horrible doctrine: But I remember the time well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure" (Faust and Johnson 58). His conviction apparently did not occur in response to a sermon, biblical reading, or personal experience. It seems not like an experience at all; he describes it as being intellectual, not emotional in character: "My reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of God's sovereignty" (Faust and Johnson 58). However, from that moment onward, Edwards says, "there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind:

But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so (Faust and Johnson 59).

As far as the record shows, the conversion made no other alteration. Nevertheless, the apparently minute changes in Edwards attitude toward the justice of divine sovereignty, from resistance to consent, then to delight, made all the difference to Edwards life.

Perhaps more important, his accepting that change as his conversion's essential mark eventually made all the difference between Edwards theology and sermon rhetoric and that of his contemporary adversaries, such as Charles Chauncey. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is especially important in sermons like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," for the sense of God's sovereignty-his total control over all existence-generates the sense of complete dependence and helplessness depicted in the imagery of the slipping sinner and dangling spider; and the perceived fact of God's sovereignty-for if God is not sovereign he is not God-justifies the damnation of those souls who perceive themselves as independent and, to use Emerson's phrase, self-reliant.

Edwards' own conversion experience would strongly color his perception of the 1734-35 awakening in Northampton. In May 1735 he wrote a letter describing these events to Benjamin Coleman, pastor of the Brattle Street Church in Boston. After being published later as *A Faithful Narrative*, it became a strong competitor for designation as Edwards most widely read book' (G 90). The importance of *A Faithful Narrative*'s popularity to the coming awakening is that it would serve as a kind of handbook of revivalist response. In the narrative Edwards stresses above all else, as he always stressed, the new convert's sense of God's sovereignty. He describes "the joy that many of them speak of . . . which they find when they are lowest in the dust, emptied most of themselves, and as it were annihilating themselves before God," when they feel "they are nothing and God is all" (Miller 4: 183-84).

A second theme Edwards stresses is the preparatory model's inability to describe the revival's conversions. Edwards own conversion did not quite fit the typical model of chronologically ordered stages of conversion, so he was particularly open to variations. Here he describes "the endless variety in the particular manner and circumstances in which persons are wrought on," and he claims it shows that "God is further from confining himself to certain steps, and a particular method, in his work on souls, than it may be some do imagine" (Miller 4: 185).

The third theme, that it "was very wonderful to see after what manner of persons affections were sometimes moved and wrought upon" (Miller 4: 174), runs throughout the narrative, with Edwards reporting laughter, tears, loud weeping, shouting, and raptures of joy and delight. Thus his experience during this minor revival

especially his witnessing such diverse emotional responses to the same sermons probably strongly influenced his views on what a sermon ought to do.

At any rate, by the time he preached "Sinners" in the summer of 1741, during the Great Awakening, he was clearly convinced of the propriety of preaching terror or rather, divine justice, a justice which when vividly imaged would induce fear in "Sinners" and joy in saints. That autumn, Edwards would defend the minister's use of such tactics.

On September 10, 1741, shortly after the enthusiast James Davenport had left New Haven in turmoil, Edwards arrived to deliver the commencement address at Yale. The sermon, expanded and published shortly afterward as *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, distinguishes between nine "no signs"—observable behaviors that argue neither for nor against the validity of a spiritual experience—and five positive signs—observable alterations in attitude and action that confirm that a spiritual change has occurred. Of major importance to understanding Edwards rhetoric in this period's sermons is his contention that a spiritual experience "promoted by ministers insisting very much on the terrors of God's holy law, and that with a great deal of pathos and earnestness" may be a positive sign that a real conversion has taken place—that emotionally-charged sermons are a legitimate means of awakening sinners (Miller 4: 246). Edwards argues that the dreadful reality of hell demands urgent, lively pleading. As an analogy, he asks if any man in his audience, seeing his child in a burning house, "would speak to it only in a cold and indifferent manner" (Miller 4: 247). Ministers, he goes on, who warn "Sinners" of hell in a cold manner "contradict themselves; for actions . . . have a language to convey our minds, as well as words" (Miller 4: 248). Thus Edwards insists that there be an agreeableness, consent, or correspondence between verbal and behavioral signs. Propriety demands, in preaching, a symmetry between actions and words.

In *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, published in 1743, his second major defense of the Awakening, Edwards repeats and expands the arguments of the *Distinguishing Marks*. Particularly relevant are his remarks on preaching in the third part of this four-part treatise. Here Edwards answers ten charges against revivalist ministers, including contentions that they address the affections rather than the understanding; preach terror to those already terrified, instead of comforting them; preach too frequently; induce bodily effects; allow too much singing; and encourage religious meetings for children. Of these Edwards rejoinder to the first is the most rhetorically significant. He admits that reasoned argument and structured discourse "have been of late, too much neglected by ministers" (Miller 4: 386), but he denies that the understanding should be addressed instead of the affections because it is a mistake to assume that these faculties are distinct. "All affections do certainly arise from some apprehension in the understanding;" therefore, the question is whether the apprehension to which the affections respond is "agreeable to truth, or else be some mistake or delusion" (Miller 4: 386). Whether the apprehension is arrived at by means of "learned handling of the doctrinal points of religion, as depends on human discipline, or the strength of natural reason," or by means of a direct presentation of "divine and eternal things in a right view" is beside the point. The point is that the "real nature of things" be apprehended, and "not only the words that are spoken, but the manner of speaking, is one thing that has a great tendency to this" (Miller 4: 386).

During this period in his ministry, Edwards witnessed several episodes of what to him appeared as genuine mass spiritual awakenings, followed by obvious displays of the community's increasingly secular values. Some parishioners who apparently experienced intense religious conversions reverted quickly to their old habits; others who displayed more, or less, intense visible effects became solid, pious Christians. He noticed that sermons, both fiery and restrained, produced similar audience responses, and that individuals responses to the call were completely unpredictable. Sometimes those previously callous and indifferent responded readily, while those most obviously desirous of light remained untouched. Such uncertainties only confirmed Edwards' belief in human dependency, in the ineffectualness of human effort, in the unreliability of human knowledge, and in the absolute sovereignty of the Almighty.

Edwards adhered to the orthodox doctrine that all sin resulted from the original sin of Adam, the first man. Everyone is born into sin, and subsequent sins are repetitions, further instantiations, of this first one. Conversion leads the Christian away from sin; therefore, to understand conversion and the rhetorical practices intended to assist conversion, one must understand what sin is, and to understand sin, one must understand original sin.

Edwards did not fully articulate his view of sin until very late in his life, in *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758).² However, there is no reason to suspect that this treatise represents any alteration of his earlier conceptions. In a fairly early notebook entry, he writes:

The best philosophy that I have met with of original sin and all sinful inclinations, habits, and principles is that of Mr. Stoddard of this town of Northampton; this is that it is self-love, in conjunction with absence of the image and love of God that natural and necessary inclination that man has to his own benefit, together with the absence of original righteousness. (Townsend 242-43)

This early conception of original sin, influenced by his grandfather, is the same one the later treatise expounds at length: sin is simply acting from self-love when one conceives of oneself as an individual distinct from and undetermined by God. However, if one is subsequently able to see one's true self as part of the infinite God, subordinate to Him, one can be saved. Self-love is sin only if one loves one's finite self.

The rhetorical coherence of Edwards so-called sermons of terror, such as "Sinners" in the Hands of an Angry God, relies upon this principle. What is the point of terrifying "Sinners" with warnings of hell, if they can do nothing to save themselves? What is the point of convincing people that they deserve to be damned, when they can do nothing to prevent their damnation? The answer is simple: if one really does perceive the justice of one's damnation, then paradoxically, one is not really damned, because perceiving the justice of one's damnation is a token of one's salvation conversion has occurred.

In keeping with the belief that sin is confusion of the finite self with the true self through the illusion of self-determining independence, "Sinners" functions primarily to heighten awareness of how salvation completely depends upon God's arbitrary will. If sinners are to be saved they must realize that their finite human values and finite human identities are thoroughly groundless that as "Sinners" they are damned and think that they are not. No matter what material comforts sinners may have in the present, no matter what temporal successes they have achieved, no matter what their visible civil status may be, salvation is not signified by their natural condition.

Edwards' Text, "Their foot shall slide in due time" (Deut. 32:35), sets the tone of utter helplessness that works its way through "Sinners". It is a sermon filled with striking images of dangling, slipping, falling, sliding --of unanticipated accidents or unforeseeable catastrophes where one completely loses self-control: "he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall, he cannot foresee one moment whether he will stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls without warning" (Edwards 125). In images such as these one's fate is determined by outside forces, beyond the reach of one's finite will. No matter how carefully one measures one's steps, slipping and tripping and falling are possible—anywhere, any time, no matter how clear and straight one's path through life may seem. This is the human condition.

Edwardsean studies commonly claim that John Locke's sensationalism at least partially guides Edwards rhetorical practice. For example, Perry Miller in "The Rhetoric of Sensation" argues that Edwards crafted his sermons so that his imagery would encompass both rational and emotional senses, and he implies that Edwards emotive appeals aim primarily to sensually impress, move the passions, and thereby convert his auditors. Miller sees this as an extension of certain aspects of Locke's orientation toward language (see Miller, "Edwards" 167-183).

Indebted to seventeenth-century Puritan authors whose repeated denouncements of the Papist doctrine of implicit faith suggest a developing empiricism, Edwards sought to fit the emerging New Science to his

Protestant religious interests. Lockean empiricism legitimized experiential faith, as Locke himself would seem to attest in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Men most commonly . . . pin their Faith [on] the Opinion of others; though there cannot be a more dangerous thing to rely on, nor more likely to mislead one; since there is much more Falshood and Errour amongst Men, than Truth and Knowledge. And if the Opinions and Perswasions of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of Assent, Men have Reason to be Heathens in Japan, Mahumetans in Turkey, Papists in Spain, Protestants in England, and Lutherans in Sueden. (657)

Along with their willingness to "pin their Faith [on] ... the Opinions and Perswasions of others," such persons are likely to demand that others obey their dictates, for they have no reason to support them, other than some alleged authority. The result is an unappealing political situation; in Locke's words, "the assuming an Authority of Dictating to others, and a forwardness to prescribe their Opinions, is a constant concomitant of this bias and corruption of our Judgements" (698). Like Edwards, Locke recognizes that one's bias or sensibility will affect one's judgement.

From what Locke says in the *Essay* about enthusiasm, he seems opposed to Edwards elevating the affections over the understanding in matters of faith. However, this is not necessarily the case. When Locke condemns revelation in connection with enthusiasm, he means direct, scripturally unmediated revelation he is opposing the Antinomian heresy (Locke 698). Edwards agrees with Locke that "Reason and the Scripture" may provide "unerring Rules to know whether it [revelation] be from GOD or no" (Locke 705).

Both Locke and Edwards accept religious experience that can be linked to biblical proof texts, and both reject direct revelation, unwarranted by Scripture. Accordingly, Locke's linkage of faith to revelation, as a "communication" from God (689), could well serve Edwards tenets of experiential faith. In short, Edwards fit Locke's empirical philosophy to a stream of Protestant thought that had been progressively developing since the Reformation.

While fairly accurate, the view of Edwards rhetoric as Lockean is incomplete. It assumes Edwards addressed his sermons solely to "Sinners" and that conversion and persuasion are the same, but Edwards knew his sermons would affect "Sinners" and saints differently. In Edwards view, sensually impressive words alone will not arouse holy affections, yet the capacity for experiencing holy affections distinguishes the saved from the damned. Instead of feeling fear or terror, saintly auditors would hear Edwards so-called brimstone sermons as tokens of God's divine justice and love.³

Edwards rhetorical practice assumes that experience grounds faith. In "Sinners", rhetorical devices of suspense and vivid concrete imagery aptly convey the fate of unassured natural men:

Natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it... hell is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; ... all that preserves them every moment is the arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance, of an incensed God. (Edwards 129-30)

Despite Edwards reputation for brimstone preaching of this sort, God's angry justice does not find its way into all of his sermons. For example, in his sermon "Heaven Is a World of Love," Edwards poses images of tranquil loveliness (See Hickman 369-73).

There is a sharp contrast between heaven and hell, a place for saints and a place for "Sinners". Their difference illuminates the unbridgeable gulf between salvation and damnation.

There is also a sharp contrast in their imagery. "Heaven is a World of Love" is more abstract, more conventional, than the vivid "Sinners". As Ola Winslow has noted, the flatness of the former's imagery is more typically disappointing:

His sermon style was seldom heightened. . . . His figures of speech were always strictly scriptural. When he needed briars and brambles, pastures and water brooks, a cloud the size of a man's hand, the high places of the forest, he took them from David and the Prophets and the Evangelists, as though he never had a farm boyhood of his own, and had not every year of his life spent weeks in lonely horseback journeys through woods, breathtaking in their spring and autumn beauty. (246)

But to expect Edwards to convert biblical theology into vivid images of everyday experience is to expect him to have meant for his message to make everyday life meaningful. That expectation is romantic. Edwards, quite to the contrary, sees the Gospel's message as rendering meaningless our everyday, natural experience and if not meaningless in contrast to heaven, horrific in its continuity with hell.

In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" the images of everyday life intensify the horrible end he envisions for the unregenerate precisely because apocalyptic horror is the natural extension of the everyday. Hell is what every day would be if it were not for God's continuing mercy. Since hell is a world of retribution and corporal punishment, hell is rhetorically and sensually speakable. It is the analogue of the natural world its only difference is the total absence of pleasure. While one's natural life may be lived in dialectical tension between pleasure and pain, in death the tension ends.

For Edwards, the tension is eternally resolved in either of two extremes: torment or pleasure. However, the pleasures of heaven are vastly different from the pleasures of earth; hence they may not be portrayed as effectively in sensual imagery. But, the torments of hell are well within a framework of earthly description because one may have a natural taste of hell right here on earth chronic pain and suffering are more analogous to the torments of hell than earthly pleasures are to the pleasures of heaven. Natural people (who are believers) know what hell is and certainly want to avoid it. No sane person willfully seeks torture. However, as "Sinners" so effectively shows, the earthly desire to avoid eternal torture is no ground for actually doing so it is all in God's hands. If this is the case, how does the occasion of hearing a sermon such as "Sinners" possibly result in a positive saving experience?

Even though "Sinners" sends on a seemingly positive note, apparently holding out hope, the motive to turn to Christ flows directly from the preceding horrific images. The last lines of "Sinners" read:

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now hanging over a great part of this congregation: Let every one fly out of Sodom: Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed. (Edwards 137)

As Robert Lee Stuart has pointed out, the exhortation to flee to the mountain is in direct and intentional contrast to the previous images of sinful man's falling down to damnation (58). The congregation is called to a sure-footed return to Christ, up the mountain trail. However, there is no vivid portrait offered of the view from the mountaintop. The inducement to climb the mountain is wholly negative. There is a drastic difference between fleeing up the mountain and climbing up it out of regard for the vista from the summit. The motive to fly out of Sodom is not hope, as Stuart's reading of "Sinners" wants to make it.

If it is true, as eyewitnesses state, that there were both "moaning and great distress" and "cheerfulness and pleasantness of . . . countenances" (quoted in Stuart 46) among the listeners at Enfield, what accounts for the difference, given that all persons in attendance heard the same sermon and were plied with the same fearsome imagery? There must have been something outside of Edwards sensual imagery that determined auditors responses that day. Somewhere between the auditor and the sermon are factors that lead to totally opposed

experiences of the same discourse joy and terror. In Edwards view, the determining criterion of one's response is not a matter of choice, and sensing this, one may come to appreciate more deeply God's sovereign will.

For Edwards, a person's state of mind will influence how he or she perceives an object's "agreeableness" or disagreeableness (Miller 1: 146). He attributes the various mental states and the conflicting judgments they may yield to the particular temper which the mind has by nature, or that has been implanted and established by education, example, custom, or some other means; or the frame or state that the mind is in (Miller 1: 146-7). Accordingly, upon hearing a sermon that vividly presents an object of choice, the auditor's temper will determine his or her experience of its imagery—the mental frame is a bias through which the sermon is screened different temperaments yield different experiences of the same discourse.

Further, Edwards distinction between natural goods and spiritual goods continually stresses the affections importance. In *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, as he distinguishes between natural goods and spiritual goods, Edwards contrasts worldly joys (and carnal delights) with holy affections. True religion consists of the holy affections. Unlike natural affections, holy affections are of a vastly more pure, sublime, and heavenly nature, being something supernatural, and truly divine, and so ineffably excellent; the sublimity and exquisite sweetness of which there are no words to set forth (Miller 2: 95).

Saintly auditors interpret Edwards words with their sanctified temperaments; speaker and auditor join in understanding what is ineffable or beyond words. That is, Edwards words do not do something to his saintly auditors in a vehement onrush of pathos; rather, the saints are able to do something with them.

Edwards sermons, accordingly, have a twofold appeal, depending on his auditors frame of mind. Saints may hear his sermons as psalmlike celebrations of God's glory the rolling thunder and leaping fire may, in Edwards words, rejoice one. In contrast, so-called natural persons may hear only pathos-charged sensationalism as they passively await the speech to affect them in a saving way. For example, the damned will identify with the sinner held over hell's flame by God's hand. 'They may shriek with terror. In contrast, saintly auditors will identify with the hand of God. 'They may shriek with joy. Grounded in assurance, saints are able to discern the awesome beauty of God's justice they have been to the mountaintop. Thus, the sermon affects two kinds of listeners very differently. Similarly, Edwards images of tranquil loveliness in other sermons may make unregenerate auditors feel alienated, rejected by their own inability to appreciate the infinite depth and beauty of God's unspeakable benevolent love.

In *Religious Affections* Edwards makes explicit the twofold impact of his sermons:

God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word, in the preaching of it, as a means fit to affect "Sinners", with the importance of the things of religion, and their own misery, and necessity of . . . a remedy provided; and to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their remembrance, and setting them before them in their proper colors, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them already. . . . And particularly to promote those two affections in them, which are spoken of in the text [2 Pet. 1:12, 13], love and joy. (Miller 2: 116)

This passage distinguishes between the two qualities and levels of experience that may be had upon hearing a sermon misery for "Sinners", love and joy for saints.

Evidence that Edwards intentionally aimed his sermons at twofold audiences may also be found in his practice. For example, in the conclusion of "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners", Edwards first addresses the natural men (four paragraphs from the end of the sermon), and finally, the godly in his audience (from the penultimate to the final paragraph):

I will finish what I have to say to natural men in the application of this doctrine, with a caution not to improve the doctrine to discouragement. For though it would be righteous in God for ever to cast you

off, and destroy you, yet it would also be just in God to save you ... I would conclude this discourse by putting the Godly in mind of the freeness and wonderfulness of the grace of God towards them . . . O! what a cause here for praise! . . . You have reason, the more abundantly, to open your mouth in God's praises . . . he alone hath made you to differ from others (Hickman 679).

Similarly, in the closing lines of "Sinners" (quoted above), Edwards claims that a great part of the congregation is already under the "wrath of Almighty God" (Edwards 137). The reference to a great part implies that a small part is already saved. This other part of the congregation may experience the closing lines of "Sinners" as addressed to their neighbors. As observers already looking down from the mountaintop, they may celebrate the perfect justice of God's vengeful judgment. Sainly auditors may echo Edwards plea, crying out and exhorting their fellow church-members to flee to join them.

In short, the meaning of Edwards sermons varies among auditors, depending on their varying spiritual conditions on their taste for the holy spirit because the auditors interpretive frameworks will affect their experiences of listening to sermons. For the unsanctified person, "Sinners" is a pathos-charged exhortation; for the sanctified person, it is a psalm-like celebration of God's sovereign justice.

To be sure, the sermon pointedly portrays mortals helplessness to do anything on their own about their spiritual state. But read in the cultural context of Edwards theological beliefs and his understanding of religious affections, the sermon in itself is not terrifying. It may, in fact, be heard as a joyful praising of God's sovereign glory. If the auditor continues to want to regard him- or herself as an independent, self-reliant individual, the image of God as an extrinsic, jealous, and angry governing agent will be an horrific one, as the thought of one's dependence upon any alien, dominating, human power would be except that God is infinitely more horrific. If the auditor already accepts him-or herself as a dependent part or image of God, subject to his law, the vision of his all-powerful vengeance would be comforting, a cause for celebration just as for patriots the thought of their nation's invincibility is a joyous one, and as the thought of being required to serve it is a welcome one. Finally, if the auditor, previously rebellious, recognizes and accepts his or her dependence, and recognizes and accepts the guilt and punishment, the auditor must, in fact, have converted must have become a new person. All these emotions must have been strong ones, especially for the newly converted, with regret intermingling with hope, guilt alternating with gratitude, joy supplanting terror.

While contemporary critics may measure the significance of Edwards sermons by the formal or psychological rationale of their impact by their structure, by the rhetorical power of their imagery, by the logic of their biblical exegeses, or by the pathologies of the particular listeners they allegedly reflect Edwards measured their significances differently. 4 In the end, one person's object of terror and loathing (and scorn and even ridicule) would be another person's object of peace and love:

The wicked, at the day of judgment, will see every thing else in Christ, but his beauty and his amiableness. . . . Therefore in a sight or sense of this fundamentally consists the difference between the saving grace of God's spirit, and the experiences of devils and damned souls. . . . (Edwards 154-55)

His listeners' responses to "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," varying from terror to delight, were, to Edwards, but a prelude to the day when justice could not be denied, when conviction would be certain, but when conversion would be impossible.

NOTES

1. For additional accounts of Edwards' sermon rhetoric *see*, for example, Cady; Steele and Delay; Smith and Hyde; and Lemay.
2. For a more complete analysis of *Original Sin* see Yarbrough, "The Beginning of Time."
3. The tendency of different auditors to experience the same sermon differently was surely observed by Edwards, not only in connection with "Sinners" reception by his auditors at Enfield, but also in connection with its delivery and reception at other places before other congregations.

For an excellent description and analysis of Edwards technique of sermon production and reproduction of the same sermons, see Wilson H. Kinnach, "General Introduction to the Sermons: Jonathan Edwards' Art of Prophesying," in Miller 10.

4. See Adams, "Linguistic Values and Religious Experience." See also Harrunond for an explanation of the way Puritans believed one's spiritual state affected one's response to poetry.

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